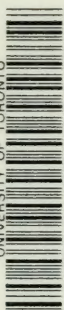


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Young, Blamire
The children's bread

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**The
Children's
read"**

A One Act Play
BY
BLAMIRE YOUNG



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The Children's Bread

A ONE ACT PLAY



BEING A TRAGEDY OR A FARCE, ACCORDING
TO HOW YOU LOOK AT IT

BY

BLAMIRE YOUNG

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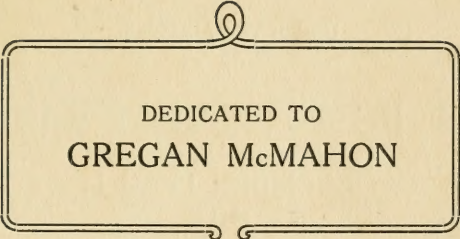
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DEDICATED TO
GREGAN McMAHON

TOORAK
MELBOURNE
1912

Produced by
GREGAN McMAHON

UNDER THE AUSPICES
OF

Melbourne Repertory Theatre

DECEMBER 13 and 14
1911

With the following Caste:

Sebastian Branbag	-	Mr. Herbert Woodhouse
Balaustion	-	Miss A. Jacoby
Iris	-	Miss Patricia McMahon

The Children's Bread

A Prologue, a Nightmare and a Reprieve

Characters :

SEBASTIAN BRANBAG, Hay and Corn Merchant of Melbourne—and in the Nightmare, an Australian Artist.

BALAUSTION } His Daughters.
IRIS }

The Prologue.

A small suburban parlour with fireplace, tea table with tea things, crayfish, cucumber, etc., frying pan, clock on mantelpiece, and a small 6 x 8 canvas behind clock. Branbag and girls discovered at tea.

BAL - I've finished, father, can I get down please?

IRIS - Me too, father?

BRAN - Are you quite sure you couldn't eat some more?

BOTH - No, thank you father.

BRAN - Just a bite.

IRIS - I couldn't really, I'm as full as full.

BAL - So am I. I mean I've had quite enough.

BRAN - Well, I suppose you're too excited about your bun struggle, or whatever it is, to eat much.

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- BAL - It's not a bun stagger at all, it's a party, a real, real party. And we've got our best dresses on, so there.
- IRIS - And new shoes, see!
- BAL - Mother said we were to be off at half past seven.
- IRIS - And we're to be there till ten.
- BRAN - What are you going to do to keep yourselves awake?
- BAL - We're all going to play games and dance and Iris and me have to say our recitations.
- BRAN - What are you going to say? You mustn't say anything long because people at parties are not in a position to protest.
- IRIS - I'm going to say, "Children, you are very little."
- BAL - And me, "The Cow." Shall I say it to you now, father?
- BRAN - Well, we'll just see if you can, only mind you mustn't ask to say it at the party.
- BAL - There are only three verses. (She gets up and recites R. L. Stevenson's "The Cow.")
- IRIS - Now me.
- BRAN - O Lord, how many verses have you got?
- IRIS - Only three.
- BRAN - Well, tune up.
(Iris recites R. L. Stevenson's "Children, you are very little.")
- BAL - I don't know whatever poor father will do all by himself with mother and us both gone. We shall be home before mother I expect.
- BRAN - O I shall be all right. Don't worry about me. Now have you got everything?
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BRAN (Iris goes to fetch wraps) to Bal. - Mind now if it should rain when it's time to come home you're to have a cab. They'll ring one up for you. Now don't forget.

BAL - A cab! Why that would cost a lot of money.

BRAN - Iris is not too strong. Doctors' bills cost more than cabs.

IRIS - (returning) You won't be lonely, will you, father? You can have my drawing book if you like.

BAL - And my new paint box. What a lot of lovely pictures he could paint while we're away.

BRAN - Paint! Why I've forgotten how. It's years since I painted (sighs). I say it's years.

BAL - Oh what a story; you made us some beautiful pictures on Sunday.

BRAN - O, I mean seriously. Though you mightn't think it, my dears, I was a student in my young days in Germany. You can thank your stars I dropped art and took up the hay and corn line.

BAL - Why, father?

BRAN - There'd have been no party frocks, or new shoes, or crayfish for tea, I can tell you. Only dry bread for artists. Dry bread and moist colors. Plain living and high thinking.

IRIS - Don't forget to make me a picture.

BRAN - What shall it be?

IRIS - Me in my party frock, and——

BAL - And me in mine.

BRAN - And what else in a small way?

IRIS - (pointing to the loaf) And a loaf of bread.

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- BAL - (pointing to the tablecloth) And a tablecloth.
- BRAN - Is that all? Now off you go and mind you enjoy yourselves.
- ALL - Goodbye, goodbye. (The girls take their dolls, curtsey and go out. Branbag bows in his best manner. He sits down in arm chair, makes himself comfortable and cuts up tobacco.)
- BRAN - Artist indeed. A lovely artist I'd have made. I'm afraid I am always too soft hearted to make a successful artist. To succeed in art now-a-days requires a monstrous lot of—of—what shall I say? Well, belief in oneself—the will to make everything and everybody bow to the great aim and object of life—Art. I could never have done that. Never had enough conceit of myself. Why I remember there were some wonderful chaps at Frankfort, regular out and outers. Berrima Bluegum, the Sydney painter, that used to be a butcher they say. He was pretty tough. And Hardface Tintacks, the middleweight bruiser. He was another. But Beetles—Bonaparte Beetles—he took the bun. He was the dandy of them all. I know for a fact his widowed mother and five little sisters were all working overtime in order to keep him in paints and pocket money, and I don't think he was ever sober enough to hold a brush. Must take a lot of determination to do that sort of thing. And yet I had my ambitions once, such as they were, and there are times when they come back to me and taunt me with my hay and corn store. I've a canvas here that I bought the last time I was tempted with backsliding. I keep it like Tennyson's
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cobbler chap kept the gin bottle, to keep me up to the collar, as it were. (He takes paper cover off and shows a clean canvas.) Looks tempting, doesn't it? Ah, the old smell puts me back in the life class. Let's see now, what was it I was to paint for the children? Two little girls, a loaf of bread and a tablecloth. H'm, h'm, well I'd have the loaf here and one kiddie kneeling and the other——What! I tell you it wouldn't come too badly now, would it? Yes, yes, of course. "The Children's Bread." Plenty of pathos and "Kiss Mammy" and all that. By jove, I believe I could put the thing in in about half an hour. (Looks furtively round.) Maria won't be back till after the kids are in bed. Why, dash my buttons, if I'd—(Telephone bell. Bran starts guiltily, drops canvas, picks it up and replaces it behind clock, then goes with great dignity to the receiver.) Yes, yes, yes. They've just gone, my dear.—I say they've just gone.—Yes, looking very nice.—Yes, I said ten.—Well, I was just—a—a—going to wash up the tea things and put things straight a bit—Crayfish and cucumber—I say—crayfish and cucumber— Indigestible! Well, it is rather so, but I thought a walk or a game of billiards would—— Do I ever go to sleep after tea?——But I don't mind washing up a bit—have you got a slavey yet?—ah—quite so—I'll leave it—I say, I'll leave it— Mind you have a good time— Goodbye, goodbye. ——I won't sit up—you'll find the shop door open—Yes, goodbye. (Returns to fireplace.) Gad that was a near thing! Like the curate—"Tempted and fell." "Tempted

and fell." (Chuckles.) A narrow squeak, I must say. Maria saved me again. Gad she saved more than me. Who knows if I had tasted paint again I might have followed in Beetle's lines and brought her and the kiddies to a miserable end. Sacrificed my family on the altar of self-indulgence—I mean Art. Ho, ho, I remember all the old twitter. "Art for art's sake." That cock would always fight! (nods) Ha, ha, Renunciation—The mystery of pain—other people's pain—The privilege of privation—Rabbits—I say Rabbits—(pipe drops.) Take the children's bread and give it to the rabbits!—dogs!—puppies!—twaddle! (sleeps.)

(It gradually gets darker—a snore or two—until the stage is dark and everything is silently cleared. A gauze curtain should be dropped).

The Nightmare.

Light not too high. Children discovered, ragged clothes, pale, bare feet. They have two miserable dolls. Bare room, box, loaf on table, two blankets, one petticoat, big palette, big brushes, tiny canvas 6 x 8, beer bottle, knife, corkscrew, easel, candle.

BAL - Father is late to-night, little one, so you must come and sit by me and I'll tell you a story, just like mother used to do before she went away. Come, sit here close to me and I'll warm your poor feet under our blanket.

IRIS - We can see the bread here.

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- BAL - It looks good, doesn't it? Only it makes you feel hungry.
- IRIS - Do you think father will give us a little bit to-night?
- BAL - I think perhaps so, if we're good. Mother used to give us big bits. Once before the frying pan was took she put two whole slices in with some dripping and gave us one each. That was the best dinner I remember. It was all brown and it crackled.
- IRIS - But I like it dry, too. I would like a bit off here where it's hard and black, it takes longer to eat like that.
- BAL - It's raining ever so hard. Father'll be wet. I hope he had a good hot dinner and lots of potato. He likes potato.
- IRIS - I did taste potato once. Ah! here comes father.
- BAL - Let's go and ask Mrs. Shaw to let us warm his slippers at her fire. (Gets slippers.) She always has a fire Tuesdays. Come along this way.
- BRAN - (Rather tipsy, faded velvet coat, long hair. An impudent impostor, singing—

"I arise from dreams of thee
In the first sweet sleep of night."

Dreams of thee! Bosh! I say Bosh! I arise from nothing of the kind. I have sat at meat at the house of Denat and I arise from that. None too steadily either, more's the pity. I say more's the pity! Five courses for 3/6 is an example of organized brigandage, organized brigandage! How's that? Still let us be fair, I say, let us be

fair. There's the wine. Gluck. H'm, leaves the tongue none too briskly. What? a little brown, shall we say, in flavour? A little short of character? a little provincial? Well, well. Still, when a man does in his last 3/6 he naturally is interested in what he is going to get for it. But stay! Anybody might think that this piece of deliberate extravagance on my part was committed from the promptings of hunger, from the vulgar desire for food. It was not. I say it was not. My poor dear wife always told me that I neglected myself for Art. "One cannot be too careful of genius," she used to say, "so try to pick a little off the beast." Poor girl. She was a terrible loss. Always a bright home to return to, always a spare shilling. But now what a difference. I always told her she denied herself necessities, let alone comforts. But when a woman is out for love, and for sacrifice, who can stop her? She believed that I should repay her in the end. That I should paint the great masterpiece yet, that should send the name of Branbag ringing down the centuries. Sebastian Branbag, the greatest of Australian Genre painters. No, the extreme measures of spending the last 3/6 in one bang was in the hope that the well being—the physical and spiritual well being—that should follow might possibly set in motion the shy fountains of inspiration and the great work might be the result. And somehow I feel as though it might. Certainly daylight would be more promising than this miserable candle, yet genius knows no obstacles. Come, let me begin.

The loaf is there still, and the girls are by this almost sufficiently emaciated to pose for the great picture of "The Children's Bread." Courage, Branbag, success is within your grasp. I chose this loaf carefully. I picked it out from a whole baking for the fine tones of brown that are to be found in its top. Come girls! My slippers, my pipe, my palette, my brushes. Waste no time.

(Enter Balaustion and Iris.)

BAL - Here, father, they're nice and warm. (They take off his boots; Branbag lights his pipe.)

IRIS - Here's the palette, father. It's very dusty.

BAL - That's because father hasn't used it for so long.

IRIS - And are you really going to paint now?

BRAN - Yes, the moment has arrived. Let me place the bread in the right light.

IRIS - Here's the knife, father.

BRAN - Knife! I want no knife.

IRIS - Mayn't we have a little bit?

BRAN - Nonsense! It would make you look too robust, too corpulent and gross. How can you hope to sit for my picture unless you are thin and pale and interesting. I paint no fat children in my picture.

BAL - But Iris is such a little girl, father. Do you think a bite or two would make her swell?

IRIS - Yes, only a teeny weeny bit, father dear.

BRAN - No. I am adamant where art is at stake. Yes, you may cry. That will do capitally. Gad I must get those tears with the high-lights on them. They

are emotionally invaluable. I say emotionally invaluable. A teeny weeny bit indeed! Why the shadows of the broken edge are perfection. Were I to destroy them I might cut up dozens of loaves before I got such harmony again. Besides that would be "wilful waste," and as you know that always brings "woeful want." Now lend me that blanket.

BAL - This is our blanket father. Wouldn't yours do?

BRAN - Mine, my child, is as you see a plaid one, and what I must have for the composition is one with red lines on it. So you see it is your privilege to sacrifice yourselves once more for art. Fortunate girls! Now let me arrange the folds, so. Ah! I see I have not lost my skill. Our worthy professor at Frankfort always used to say, "Let Branbag do the draping." None of the others could approach the suavity of my lines and the perfection of my spaces. Now mind—this blanket and this loaf are not to be touched, moved or breathed on until this picture is finished.

BAL - May we watch you paint, father?

BRAN - No, you must lie down and keep quiet, and on no account disturb me.

IRIS - May we have your blanket father?

BRAN - As the night advances I might feel the cold and in that case I should be obliged to throw it round me as I work, and it would wrench my tender heart if I had to take it off you as you slept. So if you lie close together you will keep one another warm, and be sure you don't snore. See if you can find

an old skirt of your mother's to throw over you. I remember once when I was painting from the lay figure, which I used in those days to save her the fatigue of long standing, and sometimes I fear to the detriment of my picture, I had to employ all her wearing apparel. It was a spell of frost of exceptional severity—exceptional severity—and I remember she went about in her night dress for all that time, without a word of complaint. Ah! she was a treasure. But her cough was disturbing. I say disturbing.

BAL - Oh father, Iris has found a petticoat and there's something in the pocket.

BRAN - Bring it to me at once.

IRIS - It's money, father, see, how much it is.

BRAN - A shilling! The gods are good!

IRIS - Will it buy some supper for us?

BAL - May we have some bread and milk?

BRAN - You couldn't buy bread and milk with a shilling, child. It would take lots of shillings, lots and lots, and there is only one. It would buy some beer though. German lager. I could always paint best on lager, and one must consider Art, you know. Art before all. Be good children till I return.

BAL - I suppose you couldn't bring something for us too. Iris is so little. It doesn't matter about me, because I'm big.

IRIS - Mother always used to give us a biscuit when we went to bed, sometimes two.

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- BRAN - Well, I'll see. Stay, it's raining cats and dogs.
- BAL - Cats and dogs! Oh, how funny.
- BRAN - It would be a nice kettle of fish if I were to crock up with influenza and the picture so well started.
- BAL - Shall I go for you, father? I'll run all the way and it will warm me.
- BRAN - You look uncommonly pale. Iris looks burly and her cough is no worse. I think it will help to bring her more into the picture if we send her. What do you say, Iris?
- IRIS - Must I go by myself?
- BRAN - Just up to the corner. You know the old place. Ask for a bottle of Franz Joseph. No colonial muck, mind. Genuine Franz Joseph.
- IRIS - Franz Joseph, father. I hope I sha'n't forget.
- BRAN - Well, you'd better not, for you will have to go back if you do. There's the shilling, now cut along.
(Iris goes off repeating "Franz Joseph, Franz Joseph.")
- BAL - Oh, father, I feel so sorry about Iris. Do you think mother would have let her go?
- BRAN - No, my dear. Your mother, good woman, would not have permitted it. Indeed, she would have let none of us go. She would have gone herself. I say she would have gone herself.
- BAL - Yes, father, but I can scarcely bear to think of Iris all alone in the wet. But beer is very good for Art, isn't it father?
- BRAN - Certainly, certainly.
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-

BAL - It's beer that makes you such a great artist, Mrs. Shaw said so.

BRAN - Mrs. Shaw is a drivelling old idiot.

BAL - O, father, she's good. She was so kind to mother.

BRAN - Come, come, you talk too much. Come and pose. I may as well put you in at once. Kneel down there and hold up your hands.

(Branbag rises, arranges Balaustion—Branbag paints and Balaustion droops.)

BRAN - Now hold up, Balaustion Branbag. How can I paint you if you wobble about like that.

BAL - I'll try, father, but I feel so weak, and dizzy.

BRAN - Good Lord; you're all over the place. Come, resolution, my girl, resolution; one must do something for Art, don't you know.

BAL - Oh yes, I wish I could. Could I rest my arms on something please?

BRAN - Nonsense; that would destroy the spirit of the thing. If you don't suffer I can get no atmosphere of suffering into the picture. Think of the realism of the situation. The children pining for the children's bread that is always just out of reach. Why, it's magnificent, amazing.

BAL - Yes, father, I feel it all very much.

BRAN - Courage, Balaustion, just try once more.

(Balaustion tries and fails.)

Well, rest a while and we'll try again presently.

(Branbag goes on painting, Balaustion rests.)

BAL - Father, does art always hurt like ours does?

BRAN - Art, my child, demands eternal sacrifice. It is founded on sorrow and renunciation.

BAL - Do artists always have to make people sorry?

BRAN - An artist must not shrink from the logical expression of his ideas, even though they involve the suffering of others. He must be bold to give utterance to the faith that is in him.

BAL - Is that why Iris and me have to be cold and hungry?

BRAN - That is why. As children of an artist that is your privilege.

BAL - Other people's children don't have to.

BRAN - No, other people care nothing for art.

BAL - They don't like it because it would make them sorry.

BRAN - H'm.

BAL - Can't happy people have any art?

BRAN - My child, art makes possible the luxury of pain. Artists glory in their suffering.

BAL - Does the beer make them feel better?

BRAN - H'm.

BAL - Perhaps when they have lots of beer they don't mind so much having to make little girls cry.

(Enter Iris with the beer—she coughs.)

BRAN - Ha, my little messenger, you have done well. That's the right stuff. I say that's the right stuff.

BAL - O, Iris, you poor little mite. Why, you're wet to the skin, and quite blue. Come, let me take off your things and I'll wrap the petticoat round you and warm you.

BRAN - No, no, don't do that. I must not miss that effect.
Why, it's perfect. Come, Iris, stand by the table,
child, and clasp your hands. Balaustion will attend
to you presently.

IRIS - O, father, I'm so cold and my head aches awful.

BRAN - Be brave, my child. Just think! Daddy's going to
paint you. That's the ticket.

(Iris sinks to the floor weeping.)

Well, never mind standing. I'll put you in as you
are. Don't stop crying whatever you do.

BAL - O, father, must she—must she—suffer so much?

BRAN - I'll be as quick as I possibly can. Just a few minutes
if she'll only stop coughing. Come, Iris, pull your-
self together.

IRIS - O, father, I want mother. (She faints.)

BRAN - Well now that's very disappointing. Take her away.
Balaustion, I must try to manage with what I have.

(Branbag paints and Balaustion takes Iris and
covers her up.)

BAL - Oh, Iris, Iris, look at me, that's better. Iris, you'll soon
be warmer. O, how she coughs. Could you give
her some medicine do you think, father? She's
getting bluer and bluer.

BRAN - (Still painting.) Well, don't let her disturb me more
than you can help. The least things put me off.
It's hard when I have not painted so well for years.

BAL - Father, I think we're both going to die.

BRAN - Try to do it quietly then. Only a few more strokes
and the picture is complete.

BAL - Goodbye, father, goodbye, we're going. Have we done enough for Art? O, mother, we're coming.

(They kneel before their wretched dolls.)

Goodbye, Dolly.

(The children cross themselves, lie down and die. Branbag goes on painting like one possessed.)

BRAN - There! 'Tis done! The masterpiece for which the years have waited. Done at last. "The Children's Bread" is finished.

(Goes to look at the children.)

What, both gone! Martyrs for Art! Behold my sacrifice! Branbag has given his all. Penniless and alone I stand, my masterpiece completed. If they had only lived another minute the loaf could have been moved and their hunger appeased. Too late! Too late! Well, they have written their names across the heavens never to be erased. Their sacrifice and mine is complete. This great effort has unnerved me. Come, let me break my fast.

(He opens beer and cuts bread—with his mouth full)—

"Art for Art's Sake."

The Reprieve.

The gauze curtain is gone. The furniture and tea things are replaced as before. Branbag, the hay and corn merchant, is discovered in his chair, as before, sleeping. He stirs uneasily, and mutters, "Not painted so well for years—be brave, my child—write my name across the sky with a bottle of Franz Josef—too late—too late!" and then he slowly opens his eyes with a dazed expression. By degrees the horror of the dream comes back to him. He sits up in his chair and calls,

BRAN - Maria, Girls! (Silence.)

(He suddenly leaps to his feet.)

Gone.

(He turns to the table, takes up the loaf and looks at it in a puzzled way and puts it down doubtfully. He examines the floor where the children died. Then he has an inspiration and runs to the mantelpiece and takes the canvas from behind the clock. He looks at the cover for a while, not daring to open it. At last he opens it and shows the canvas, bare. He is immensely relieved.)

Ah! It was a dream then, a horrible dream. I dreamed—I dreamed I was an artist—A REAL ARTIST! Jehosophat! (Mops himself, takes up the dish of crayfish and looks at it reproachfully.) It was you, was it? Crustacean! Monster! Dinosaur! Crocodile! Red! Red—I say—with the children's blood. Never again—Never again—(puts it down and regards the canvas once more.)

BRAN - You Temptress, Delilah, Jezebel. Too long have I spared you. There!! (throws it on the floor and

stamps on it, works himself up and dances on it, shouting—"Impostor, fool, murderer, quack."

(In the midst of this, enter children. They are rosy and happy in their party dresses, bearing their swell dolls. They shrink back alarmed on seeing their father. When he sees them at last he springs towards them and drags them forward.)

BOTH - Father, whatever are you doing?

BRAN - My children! Thank God! You are safe then. You are really safe! You must never never leave me again.

BAL - Why not? What have we done?

BRAN - You are wet through; aren't you, Iris? (He feels her hair and clothes).

IRIS - No, of course she's not, it's a lovely night, and Doris came to the door with us.

BRAN - Aren't you cold, then? with bad coughs and blue and shivering?

BAL - Father, what nonsense!

IRIS - I'm hot as fire. We're been playing oranges and lemons.

BRAN - Well, you must be hungry!

IRIS - O, we had cakes and trifle.

BAL - And jelly and heaps else.

(Branbag cuts off a piece of crust and presents it to Iris.)

BRAN - I'm sure you'd like this nice brown piece.

IRIS - Dry bread! O dear no, thank you father.

BRAN - (Seizing the frying pan). Well, I insist on frying you some bread and dripping. A slice each.

BOTH - Bread and dripping. O, I couldn't.

BRAN Yes, yes, just to please me, all brown and crackling.
You'll let me, won't you? (Cuts bread and begins
to fry.)

BAL - (Taking canvas.) Whatever can this be? Father,
you've broken it to bits.

IRIS - Father, Doris has a new doll.

BAL - It's a boy and it's dressed like a soldier.

IRIS - And it has such a funny name.

BAL - Yes, father, you'd never guess.

IRIS - It's called, Franz Joseph.

BRAN - Franz Joseph! (Drops frying pan.) Ye gods and
little fishes.

BAL - Whatever is it father? You seem so funny.

BRAN - Nothing, nothing my dears. I'm afraid I don't make
a very good cook. Perhaps after all you had better
get ready for bed. I'll be in and tuck you up in a
minute.

(The children go off).

So they're safe and sound after all. I can scarcely
believe it. No more Art for me. I say no——

(Telephone bell).

Yes, is that you Maria? Are you quite well? Are
you sure? I say, are you sure?—Well, I was feeling
anxious. I thought, that is I fancied, I mean, I—
I—Won't you come back at once?—Yes, they're
back. Isn't it a mercy? No, I didn't mean that.
I mean it's just as well to have them at home, don't
you know. O, no, no accident, none at all. I was
only thinking that it might have been.—O, dear

no, not at all, not at all. O, I never worry—
They're just getting ready for bed.—I'll call them
and you can hear for yourself. (Calls off.) Girls,
girls, come here and say good night to your mother
through the telephone.

(The children enter in their nighties, with dolls.)

IRIS - Good night, mother. We had such a lovely party.
When we came father was having a party all by
himself. He was dancing and reciting. He did
look funny. He wanted to make us eat dry bread
and then he began to make us bread and dripping.
Yes, mother, I'll tell him. Father, mother wants
you to speak.

BRAN - Yes, my dear, what is it? What? What? I'm afraid
the instrument is a little out of order. What's
that? I intoxicated! My dear, you're quite—
you're—I assure you you're mistaken. I haven't
had a single drink.

BRAN - No, no——Well, as a matter of fact, I never went
out at all. No, the fact is the fire was rather low
and I was trying to get myself warm. That was
all. It's the truth, anyway. Now, Balaustion——

BAL - Good-night, mother. My baby is talking to you, can
you hear? Father has broken——

(Branbag rings off).

BRAN - Now, girls, say good-night to all these kind people.

BOTH Good-night, everybody.

(The three take hands and dance round.)

CURTAIN.

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